

VOYAGER 15

SNEAK PREVIEW

UNIVERSE PARALLEL

TRACI HARDING

PRELUDE

ACROSS THE UNIVERSAL DIVIDE

Rest was not essential to the inhabitants of the Otherworld, but they could choose to nap and dream about life on the Earth plane — past, present and future — for the Otherworld was beyond the constraints of time, space and physical reality.

The Lord of the Otherworld, who could frequent either the physical or subtle realms of existence, usually chose to sleep in the realm he ruled, as in his dreams there he could revisit the years he'd spent under his parents' roof, with all his siblings close at hand. He had only come to appreciate how special and fleeting his childhood had been after his parents had departed this universal scheme to join the ranks of the Grigori — a causal race of beings frequenting a level of awareness beyond even that of the astral realms of the Otherworld. Over a century had passed since his parents' ascension, and still the Lord mourned their company, counsel and the tight-knit family life they had created for himself and his siblings.

Blissfully snoozing through the memory of one childhood New Year, which the Lord had relived many times in his dreams, his recollection of the event unexpectedly altered.

He was seated around a table with his brothers — Rhun, Zabeel, and Sparrowhawk; his brother-in-law — Cadwallon; his sisters — Rhiannon and Liratheia; and Rhun's wife — Sybil; when the sound of his mother's voice called him from the table.

'Avery. Avery, I need you, sweetheart.'

Her voice led him out into the kitchen, and when his mother was not there, out across the back veranda and into the darkened back yard. This never happened. Avery was quite aware that his psyche had broken loose from his memory and was now ad-libbing.

His mother was not hard to spot, for as she gazed up at the night sky she glowed with the light of the full moon. Her entire presence radiated a celestial brilliance far greater than it had in life, thus Avery considered that his dream was venturing from the past to the present and maybe even into the future.

‘Mother?’ He announced himself as he approached. ‘You called?’

She looked to him and smiled warmly, her face that of a young woman, although the soul-gaze behind her violet eyes evinced the being of infinite wisdom that she now was. ‘There is about to be a cosmological event,’ she said as Avery came to a stop alongside her. ‘This event can not be avoided, but with your help the Grigori hope to prevent any more destruction.’

‘Kila is in danger?’ Avery clarified, wondering if this dream was a premonition.

‘Yes ... and not just Kila.’ She held a hand to his forehead, which shot the Lord’s consciousness into outer space, where he drifted calmly for a moment.

The silent vacuum of space was shattered by the loudest crack the Lord had ever heard, and the sound shot fear, like icy daggers, through his entire being. ‘What the ...?’

‘It’s a space-quake,’ advised his mother’s voice inside his mind, as a dark cloud, seething with electromagnetic activity, erupted and billowed out horizontally to the left and right, rumbling loudly as it did so.

A tear, like a giant eye-lid opening inside the universe, ruptured space and the dark clouds parted to reveal a bright blue ball of light like a huge glowing iris — that was growing larger.

The giant sphere of light seemed to be shrouded by a celestial mist, but as Avery watched the phenomenon he realised the sphere was not shrouded in mist, it was being dragged along in its wake — the sphere was not growing larger, it was getting closer! This revelation came as the celestial cloud reached the Lord, and as the high-speed force moved through him, he felt the auras of all those souls dearest to him merge with his being. Sacha, they called him by his Grigorian name, and a wonderful feeling of being at home, at peace and at one with all creation, sent Avery into a complete state of bliss.

This mass was not a mist, but an entity. It was what the ancients of the Earth scheme called an arupa-deva — a divine architect of the multiverse. Avery knew this as, beyond his soul calling in the ranks of the Grigori, beyond where his soul group merged into a silent watcher, there was this being, Azazèl-mindos-coomra-dorchi, who was the highest manifestation of himself and all his kindred.

Once the deva passed by, Avery’s attention turned back to the sphere that was almost upon him. Its bright blue illumination had gone and left a massive, dark planetoid hurtling through Kila’s solar system on a collision course with the sun of his home planet.

The Lord of the Otherworld willed his perception closer to the surface of the unknown sphere where he found not the barren surface he had expected, but a globe covered with darkened cities, the buildings of which were littered with human bodies.

‘Are they dead?’ Avery wondered.

A pressure lifting from his forehead returned Avery’s consciousness to the backyard of his childhood where he stood alongside his mother.

‘Only sleeping,’ she advised.

‘Then the planet must be stabilised and placed in a suitable orbit around a star,’ he concluded rationally.

‘Only you can command the elements of the physical world, and only they can place this planet safely in orbit around your sun.’

Avery nodded surely to accept the task being assigned to him, although he had never attempted to command the elements in space, and he’d never summoned the kind of massive elemental support that he was going to need to perform a feat of this magnitude. ‘But how could this happen? Where did this planet come from? What shall become of them?’

‘What has been done can be undone, we are seeing to that personally,’ she advised, stroking his hair, proud of his level head in the face of such adversity. ‘We are coming back to your aid and —’

‘You and Father?’ Avery had to butt in to clarify, and when his mother nodded to confirm, his heart near exploded in his chest. ‘When?’

‘Very, very, soon ... we are on our way to you as we speak.’

The news was music to Avery’s ears and filled him with the optimism to face the pending challenge.

‘Understand that the people of this planet fear psychic power: they have little concept of spirituality and have no idea what has happened to their planet.’

‘What did happen?’ Avery was horrified by her brief.

‘All the answers await you in your near future.’ His mother kissed his forehead and in a whisper advised him to ... ‘WAKE.’

The Lord awoke with a start in his marital bed; his wife, Fallon, still swathed in a silken sheet, slept on beside him. He kissed her shoulder and prepared to leave their Otherworldly palace.

‘My Lord might wish to explain what compels him from our bed at this odd hour ...’ Fallon said to forestall his departure, ‘... if my Lord does not wish me to wonder if he has found himself a mistress?’

'Now why would I do that?' Avery returned to her side to kiss her properly and afterwards she smiled, but not sincerely.

'You know why,' she uttered softly — for in one hundred years of marriage they had yet to conceive a child. Immortal, as they both were, they — the Chosen — were not as fertile as mortals and they were destined only ever to produce a few children, but rarely did a Chosen couple never produce a child at all.

'We are no longer entirely of the physical world,' Avery told her, 'and maybe that is the price we pay to move between dimensions. Would you give that ability back in return for a child?'

Her expression was pained. 'To give that up, is to give you up. So the answer is no, I would not.' Fallon's kiss was impassioned and left no doubt in Avery's mind that she still adored him after all this time.

'And that's why I would never need a mistress.' The Lord freed himself and backed off the bed, whereupon Fallon raised herself to a seated position.

'So where are you going?'

'I have an errand to run for the Grigori,' he explained as he got to a standing position. 'There is going to be a very loud bang! It's nothing to be worried about really, but you might want to make the governor of our fair planet aware of the fact. Tell him that I know the cause and that there is no need for anyone on Kila to be concerned.'

'You want me to wake the governor, Avery?' Fallon knew instinctively that dawn was still hours away for the residents of Kila's only city, Chailida.

'Better sooner than later,' he suggested, manifesting an organic fibre suit to cover his naked body.

In the Otherworld Avery would not be physically affected by the vacuum in space, but this event was taking place in the physical world, so he would have to conduct his mission in that plane of existence. In the physical realm even an immortal would experience all the symptoms of exposure to space: air would rush from his lungs, whereupon a mortal human would lose consciousness and die of hypoxia within minutes; as Avery was not mortal, he would remain conscious as his blood pressure dropped and began to boil, the internal steam created would bloat his body to twice its normal size as his circulation slowed. Then the rapid evaporation of his bodily fluids would cause a frost to beset his exterior. Fortunately the Lord of the Otherworld had a secret advantage that none of the other Chosen Ones had — unquestioned command of the elements of nature. And as all of these repercussions of physical exposure in outer space could be staved off with a little oxygen, Avery teleported himself to a more natural setting to enlist the aid of the elementals of the air.

'I seek air's shield for the task I face,

Come dance around me in outer space.

Aid this new planet to orbit our sun.

In the name of Grigori I beseech you, come!

From the four cardinal points wind came rushing to whirl around Avery like a twister. The nymphs of the air were so beautiful when they were in good spirits, he considered on the quiet. At a distance they appeared like tiny spheres of golden light, but as they drew nearer, their muted temptress forms flew around Avery, blowing him kisses, caressing his face as their element played with his hair and lifted him clean off the planet.

When the deep space cruiser began vibrating violently, the Orions thought they were under attack. The commander of the vessel was already scampering to reach the bridge, having been jolted from his deep slumber beneath a sunlamp by a huge booming sound.

'Yahweh Shyamal.' The second-in-command, Zeptu, acknowledged his superior and made the rest of the crew aware of his presence.

'Are we under attack?' The Yahweh demanded.

'No, my Lord,' Zeptu advised. 'We have been hit by the shockwaves of an astronomical event.' He gave a nod to the communications officer, who raised the soft-light screen in the middle of the bridge so that their superior could view the footage of the event that their telescopic cameras were picking up.

When Shyamal saw the huge electrical cloud erupting in space, he was concerned — he'd been adrift in the universe for countless thousands of years since escaping the last of the great Pyramid Wars on Earth and he had never seen anything like this before. 'Is it a storm?'

'The quantum readouts we are receiving seem to indicate activity akin to the birth of a wormhole, or a white hole,' the communications officer advised.

'I strongly suggest that we move our craft as far from the immediate area as possible,' Zeptu concluded.

With a ping from the radar console, the officer there advised that they were picking up a life form reading in the area. 'But we are not detecting any craft,' he added, bemused.

'A life form?' Shyamal was doubtful as he approached the radar screen console to see the readout himself. 'Out in space, unprotected?'

The Yahweh was about to say that nothing could survive in space without life support until he remembered that was not the case. Back on Earth there had been a human demi-god who had such ability, and he had foretold of many more of his ilk who would be born into Earth's evolution.

'Taliesin.' The Yahweh said his name with spite and relish; could the Lord of the White Lodge have succeeded in creating his 'Chosen Ones'?

'Pardon, Captain?' As long ago as their Earth life had been, Zeptu recognised that name. 'We are a long, long way from Earth, I doubt very much —'

'It's been a long, long time since we were in this quadrant of the galaxy,' Shyamal hissed, 'anything could have transpired.' He looked from his 2IC to his communications officer. 'I want a visual on that life form.'

'Yes, Yahweh.' The communications officer zoomed his telescopic cameras in on the reading.

'We should retreat —' Zeptu insisted once more and got a claw in the face as he was shoved out of the way on Shyamal's route back to his position before the soft-light screen.

We find out if it is human first,' Shyamal insisted, stroking his scaled belly, which was leaner than it had ever been. 'If we don't feed soon we'll perish anyway.'

'But it can't possibly be human.' Zeptu frowned, and then was stunned to see a human form floating alone in space on the soft-light screen before them, unprotected by so much as a helmet. 'I could be wrong of course.'

Shyamal smiled; he'd only ever fed on mortal human beings, this was a superhuman and if he was one of Taliesin's Chosen Ones, it meant only one thing. 'Immortals.' His belly grumbled with relish.

On-screen the anomaly in space opened wide and a blue, glowing orb came shooting out. The sphere was being drawn towards the tiny human by a celestial mist and, as the mist came over him, the human began to glow. At the same time the glowing sphere lost its lustre and fell into darkness, but the velocity of its movement lost none of its momentum.

'This is the Logos at work,' Zeptu uttered, 'we should not interfere.'

Without a sideways glance, Shyamal punched Zeptu, and remained focused on the events unfolding on the screen before him.

The glowing human cleared the mist and floated in the path of the oncoming planet, appearing to be asleep as their huge vessel began to rattle and shake once again.

'There has been a sudden increase in the solar wind activity from the sun behind us,' advised the weatherman viewing the readout of quantum activity in the area, 'and we are being drawn along with the current towards the anomaly.'

'Towards the anomaly, or the human?' Shyamal asked.

'What difference does it make?' Zeptu asked. 'We'll burn out the engines if we don't jump out of the stream now!'

'Shut down the engines,' Syhamal called, and looked to his weatherman to get his answer.

'The wind appears to be pooling around the human, my Lord.'

Shyamal's eyes returned to the events unfolding on-screen. 'Let's see what he does.'

The solar wind continued to build around the human and then shot out towards the approaching planet, slowing its pace like a ball trapped in a net.

'The wind is encasing the planet,' wheezed the weather officer in amazement, 'forming an —'

'— artificial atmosphere,' Shyamal concluded, pleased. 'And why would he bother doing that, if there was no life to sustain on that globe?'

'I'm getting a massive reading on human life forms, from all over the planet,' the radar officer advised.

Zeptu was suddenly inspired by his Lord's risk-taking. 'Who would have thought that there would be life in the heart of the An-Tu-Im?'

This quadrant of the galaxy had been named An-Tu-Im, 'Heaven of Storms', by the previous rulers due to the large amount of meteor fields, asteroids and black hole activity in the region. This one tiny galaxy known as Esh-mah was the only safe haven for light-years around.

'The perfect place to hide Utopia,' Shyamal proffered; he could almost taste those pineal fluids now, and how much sweeter and more life sustaining would they be when sucked from an immortal?

The Yahweh eyed the human beacon on-screen as it flew off slowly and the huge planetoid followed obediently behind.

'Do you think we might be biting off a bit more —'

'Say it and I'll kill you myself.' Zeptu was cut short by Shyamal, and chose not to debate the issue further. 'His DNA can be unbraided as easily as any other human being's,' Shyamal spoke up to advise all his crew. 'A sonic pulse from the de-evolver will cut him down to size.'

The crew thrummed their feet on the ground in a show of support for their Yahweh.

'A planet-sized feast has been flown in especially for us.' Shyamal found it ironic. 'It seems that the famous motto of the White Lodge might have some credence after all ... the universe always provides.'

PART 1

ESH-MAH

'THE DIVINE INSIDE PLACE'

ESCAPE FROM ESPONISA

When Jazmay awoke in darkness with the ground trembling beneath her, she wondered if she might be dreaming. If she was not imagining things, then the darkness meant that the laser bars of her containment cell were switched off — along with all the lighting and power in the detention level. Something else felt amiss — she reached down to find that the psychic shackle, which had kept her prisoner for years, had fallen from her ankle and lay defunct on the floor. 'A miracle,' she uttered, as exhilaration welled within her.

She reached out to feel for the boy, who was still unconscious on the floor beside her.

Fari Doon was not her son, but she had lied to prevent them being separated following their capture by the Maladaan Secret Service four years ago. He'd only been six years old at the time and Jazmay shuddered to think what might have become of him had she not taken him underwing.

Rather than waste time waking him, she scooped Fari up and made for the void in the cell wall.

She had walked this corridor many times and had no problem finding her way in the dark. Just short of the end of the cell block area, a body across the path tripped Jazmay up and she fell onto the steel grate floor, elbows first, with the weight of the lad she carried to compound her injury. 'Ouch!' she whispered, to get past the pain.

'What's happened?' Fari woke upon impact.

'Shhh!' Jazmay warned, as the guard she shuffled away from began to stir.

'What's going on?' The guard roused himself.

As the man slowly got to his feet, Jazmay gripped Fari's unshackled ankle to draw his attention to the missing restraint and then moved close to his ear to whisper, 'We are free.'

The boy needed no more prompting than this. Fari sprang to his feet and ran at the guard. He jumped up and snatched the night vision mask from the large man's head so that he might see his target better, and then served him an almighty punch in the jaw. The impact sent the guard hurtling into the wall at the opposite end of the corridor, where he fell to the floor and all was quiet for a second.

'Fari Doon the thrice strong, I presume,' said a voice in the darkness.

'Who's there?' Jazmay demanded in a whisper, as Fari tossed her the night vision headset, which she pulled on.

'They call me the hurricane,' replied the big brawny blond fellow who had joined them in the corridor.

'Wow, you're Vadik Corentin!' exclaimed Fari, knowing this man was the most feared and defiant of all the psychics, for it was said that he could summon the very elements of nature to do his bidding.

'And you are Jazmay Cardea, the Phemorian shape-shifter.' Vadik folded his arms and maintained a safe distance from her. 'I'd offer to help you up, but I'm not prepared to lose my identity in the process.'

'I don't need your help.' She got to her feet on her own.

'I do believe that between the three of us we might stand some chance of escaping this joy-forsaken place,' Vadik suggested.

'Why should we trust you?' Jazmay scoffed at the suggestion; as a Phemorian, she naturally didn't like men, but this man in particular she was wary of.

'Because I hate these MSS bastards as much as you do, and the enemy of my enemy is ...'

'... an ally,' Fari concluded, excited to have the legend with them.

As it would cause more trouble to object, Jazmay looked to the sealed metal door that prevented their escape route from the detention block. 'First things first, how are we going to get this —'

Fari suddenly went speeding past her to plough the full weight of his tiny form into the metal barrier, and although he made a mighty fine dent in the door, it did not cave completely. 'Aw ...' Fari slid to the floor defeated, '... strong door.'

'Give me a go,' Vadik suggested, motioning them to stand back against the wall.

Jazmay watched closely as Vadik bowed his head to focus himself inward and, as he did, a wind began to whip about his head, stirring his blond hair — it appeared that the disturbance was arising from within the man's clothes and escaping through his collar. The turbulence grew and yet remained swirling around Vadik's body. He then drew himself up tall, eyed his target and hurled the raging mass of air at the doorway, whereby the metal gave at the wall, and the door, metal frame and all, went crashing across the room and into an office.

'Cool!' Fari exclaimed, having not seen but heard their success.

'Shh.' Jazmay reminded the lad they were trying to escape without attracting too much attention.

'Are you kidding me?' Fari defended his small outburst. 'Did you hear that collision?'

'Yes, I'm sure we just awoke the entire MSS,' she hissed, 'all the more reason to be quiet and not give our presence and position away.'

Fari put a lid on his excitement, and nodded seriously in accord.

'I'll lead.' Jazmay gripped his hand and Fari took hold of Vadik's hand with his other. She drew a deep breath for courage and stepped out into the corridor to make a beeline for the emergency staircase — the lifts would prove a useless route to the surface.

Even after their explosive exit they appeared to be the only souls awake and their passage to the stairs was swift and uneventful. Thankfully the locks on the doors had automatically switched off during the blackout to prevent MSS staff from being trapped underground. The detention block containing all the psychic captives remained locked, however — if those with 'the Powers' all perished it would be very convenient.

Well the cage is open now. Jazmay smiled to herself as she began to scale the stairs two at a time — it was twenty flights to the surface from here.

'Do we have a plan?' Vadik whispered his query as the stairwell was like a sound amplifier.

'We're going to borrow a transport from the MSS, and fly ourselves off this shit-hole planet.' Jazmay picked up her pace.

'You know how to fly MSS spacecraft?' Vadik was astounded.

'No,' Jazmay replied, 'but I will by the time we get to the launch pad ... I just need to find me a pilot.'

Jazmay could read an individual's DNA upon making skin contact with them, and could then transform her own DNA to match, giving her access to her subject's genetic memory, traits, skills and so forth. She also had a photographic memory and so never forgot a genetic code once it had been memorised — hence Vadik's hesitation to make skin contact with her.

They had climbed eighteen floors, by Jazmay's count, when the lights came on, and near blinded her.

'Shit!' Jazmay whipped the night vision goggles from her head, to scale the last two flights with anxious haste. She grabbed for the exit door handle but found it locked. If the lights were on, then there were MSS agents conscious on this floor — all the major offices and the primary security and communications rooms were located here. 'Things just got more complicated.'

'I don't see why.' Vadik passed a hand over the electronic keypad for the door, whereupon a small bolt of electricity shot from his palm, shorting out the keypad. 'Now try,' Vadik suggested to Jazmay, who

pressed down on the handle to find the door opened.

'Neat trick.' Jazmay was inwardly pleased they'd let him tag along.

Fortunately the exterior launch bay was at the opposite end of the complex to the offices, and although movement could be heard down the corridor to the right, they quickly made in the opposite direction,

where people were still in the land of Nod. Vadik took care of all the security doors en route and when they passed out of the building and onto the landing strip, all three of the long-time captives revelled in the rays of the rising sun.

'The sun is bigger than I remember.' Fari couldn't drag his squinting sights from it.

'He's right, it is bigger!' Vadik found this most curious.

'We don't have time to star-gaze right now.' Jazmay turned back to grab hold of Fari's hand to speed up his pace.

The vehicle Jazmay had her eye on was an MSS Interceptor Drop Ship, which was not as fast or as light as she would have liked, but it was the only craft that had ground crew passed out all around it — hopefully a pilot was among them.

In the back of the drop ship, Jazmay found what she was looking for. 'Yes!' She knelt down beside the female pilot and took hold of her hand — moments later, the transformation was complete.

Vadik removed the MSS pilot from the vessel and closed up the hatch door as Jazmay took the pilot seat. 'Strap up, boys,' she advised as she fired up the engine and launched them into the heavens.

This extract is not final and should not be quoted for review purposes.

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